# The Idolatry of the Self Serving Bias

## Section I. Opening Narrative – The Charge of the Light Brigade

The Charge of the Light Brigade at the Battle of Balaclava on 25 October 1854 stands as a vivid historical narrative of decision-making grounded in false information accepted with absolute certainty, culminating in disaster.

It was the Crimean War. British, French, and Ottoman forces faced the Russian army on the hills and valleys surrounding the Black Sea port of Balaclava. From a high ridge, the British commander Lord Raglan could see Russian troops attempting to carry away captured British artillery. He dictated an order for the cavalry to advance quickly and prevent the loss of those guns. The order was written, handed to Captain Louis Nolan, and sent down the chain of command to Lord Lucan, who oversaw the cavalry, and then to Lord Cardigan, who commanded the Light Brigade itself.

The problem was not the courage of the men. The problem was the information.

From the high ground Raglan could see one set of guns. From the valley floor Lucan and Cardigan could not see those guns at all. What they could see was a different Russian battery at the far end of a long, open valley, heavily defended on three sides. The written order was already ambiguous. Captain Nolan, impatient and convinced of the urgency, added his own gestures and intensity. In the pressure of the moment the limited and unclear command was enlarged into something far more specific and far more deadly: a direct charge straight down the North Valley into the heart of the Russian artillery.

Lord Cardigan raised his sword. The Light Brigade, roughly six hundred and seventy men, moved forward at a trot, then a canter, then a gallop. They rode with full conviction that they were obeying the clear will of their commander. Russian cannons opened fire from the front and from both flanks. Men and horses fell in heaps. Those who reached the guns at the end of the valley fought briefly and bravely before the shattered remnants turned and tried to ride back through the same storm of fire.

In the space of a few minutes the brigade was destroyed as a fighting force. More than a hundred men were killed, many more wounded or taken prisoner. The courage was undeniable. The certainty was absolute. The information on which they acted had been distorted by distance, by incomplete

communication, and by the human tendency to fill gaps with assumption. They obeyed a version of the order that no longer matched the original intent, and the result was unnecessary slaughter.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson later captured the tragedy in a single line that still echoes: “Someone had blundered.”

The men of the Light Brigade did not lack bravery. They lacked accurate information, and they accepted the information they were given with total confidence. That combination produced disaster.

Section 2. The Same Pattern in the Heart

The Light Brigade rode to destruction because limited and unclear information was enlarged, filled in with assumption, and then obeyed with absolute certainty. The same pattern appears in the way we handle the words of God.

We receive a statement from Scripture that is limited, clear, or incomplete. Instead of leaving it as it stands, we quietly enlarge it, soften it, or complete it until the final version protects our preferences, our comfort, our identity, or the ideology we already hold. We then treat that revised version with the same total confidence as if it was God’s original intent.

This is the self-serving bias at work. It is the tendency to interpret and adjust information so that the end result advances or protects the self while still appearing faithful to the original source. In spiritual life it takes a word from God and edits it until the resulting picture of God is more useful, less demanding, or more affirming of what we already want to believe.

Notice how the process usually begins. It does not start with open rejection of God. Most people who fall into this pattern still speak the language of faith. They still open the Bible. They still claim to follow Christ. The rebellion is quieter than that. It begins with modification. A boundary is softened. A gap is filled with preferred material. A limited statement is expanded until it no longer constrains the self. The original words remain on the page, but the operative meaning has already shifted.

Jesus described the only safe posture in John 5:19: “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.” He repeated the same boundary in John 7:16: “My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me.” The Son refused to go beyond what the Father said and did. That restraint is the opposite of the self-serving bias. The bias does the reverse. It takes what God has said and quietly reshapes it until the

final version serves the self.

The result is a version of God that feels familiar and safe, yet is no longer the same God who actually spoke. The question is whether we will live by what God has actually said, or by the edited version we have constructed to protect what we want to believe is true.

## Section 3. Defining the Self-Serving Bias

The self-serving bias is the tendency to interpret, expand, or revise information in ways that protect or advance the self's preferences, comfort, status, or preferred narrative, while still appearing to remain faithful to the original source.

In spiritual terms it is the quiet habit of adjusting what God has said or demonstrated so that the resulting picture of God better accommodates what we already want to believe, what we need to feel secure, what protects our identity and comfort, or the permission we seek to do what we want. The bias does not usually throw the Bible out. It keeps the Bible open and then edits the meaning until the final version serves the self.

Several features mark this pattern.

First, it retains the language of faithfulness. The person still speaks of following God, still quotes Scripture, and still claims loyalty to Christ. The vocabulary stays Christian. The substance is quietly changed.

Second, it works by small expansions rather than open denial. A limited statement is enlarged. An incomplete sentence is completed with preferred material. A clear boundary is softened just enough to create room for the desired outcome. Each adjustment feels reasonable in isolation. Together they produce a different message.

Third, it treats preference as evidence. What feels right, safe, or advantageous is allowed to govern the reading. The question shifts from "What has God actually said?" to "What reading protects what I want to believe?" Once preference is given that authority, the text is no longer allowed to stand in judgment over the self. The self stands in judgment over the text.

Fourth, once the bias has been in place long enough, the edited version begins to feel like the original. The false filter becomes invisible through long use. What began as a small adjustment hardens into the only way the person

knows how to see. At that point the constructed picture of God is no longer recognized as constructed. It simply feels true.

This is why the bias is so effective and so dangerous. It does not announce itself as rebellion. It presents itself as deeper insight, necessary clarification, or pastoral wisdom. Yet the direction of movement is always the same. The self's needs become the measuring standard, and the words of God are adjusted to fit.

Jesus refused that movement. In John 5:19 He said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner." He would not go beyond what the Father said and did. The self-serving bias does the opposite. It takes what God has said and reshapes it until the final version is more useful to the self. That is the pattern we must learn to recognize.

## Section 4. Biblical Illustrations of the Bias

The self-serving bias is not a modern invention. Scripture records the same pattern in clear detail.

### Balaam

In Numbers 22 the king of Moab sent messengers to hire the prophet Balaam to curse Israel. God told Balaam plainly, "You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed." Balaam refused the first group of messengers. When a second, more prestigious group arrived with greater promises of honor and reward, Balaam asked God again. This time the Lord said, "If the men come again to call you, rise up and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you shall you do."

Balaam took the inch God gave him and reinterpreted it to fulfill his hearts desire. Because the men did not come again, The legal terms were never met in the sense God intended. The permission was narrow, provisional, and still bound by absolute restriction on speech. Balaam's heart, however, was already fixed on the reward Balak offered. Once desire became the interpreter, the conditional clause expanded into general authorization. He could now travel under the appearance of obedience while pursuing the very outcome God had already forbidden.

That is the classic operation of the self-serving bias. It does not usually invent a contradictory command. It simply enlarges a limited concession until the

concession no longer constrains the preferred result. The original boundary remains on the page; it is simply no longer allowed to govern the decision.

Saul

In 1 Samuel 15 God gave King Saul a clear command through the prophet Samuel: go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have. Do not spare them. Kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey. Saul gathered the army and won the battle, yet he and the people spared King Agag and kept the best of the sheep, oxen, and other valuable animals. When Samuel confronted him, Saul claimed he had obeyed. He said the animals were kept to sacrifice to the Lord.

Samuel answered with the well-known rebuke: “Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams.” Saul had not rejected the command outright. He had reinterpreted it. The clear order of total destruction was softened into a partial obedience that still allowed him to keep the spoil and maintain the approval of the people. The religious language of sacrifice became the cover for the self-serving choice. God rejected Saul as king because of it.

The Isolation of Luke 6:38

Jesus said in Luke 6:38, “Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.”

The full context begins one verse earlier. Jesus said, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned.” The entire unit is about the standard of judgment a person uses toward others becoming the standard applied back to them. Giving is one example of that larger principle of reciprocal measure.

When the single sentence “Give, and it will be given to you” is lifted out of that setting, it is easily turned into a transactional formula: give money or effort in order to receive money or favor in return. The warning about the standard of measure is left behind. The result is a spiritual economy that promises return while quietly removing the demand that one’s own standard of judgment be righteous. The limited statement is expanded into a mechanism that protects the desire for guaranteed blessing.

Mark’s Parenthetical Comment

In Mark 7 Jesus confronted the Pharisees over their traditions about hand-washing and purity. He called the crowd to Himself and said that there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him. Rather, the things that proceed out of the man are what defile the man. He explained that food does not go into the heart but into the stomach and is eliminated.

Mark then adds a parenthetical remark: “Thus He declared all foods clean.” Jesus Himself did not speak those words in the passage. He spoke about the true source of defilement being the heart. Mark supplied an interpretive conclusion. Even if a person agrees with the final outcome that all foods are clean under the new covenant, Mark still had no authority to place a declaration in Jesus’ mouth that Jesus did not make. The addition shows how easily an explanatory gloss can be treated as if it carried the same weight as the original speech.

In each of these cases the pattern is the same. A word from God is given. The word is limited or clear. Human desire then enlarges it, softens it, or completes it until the final version protects preference, status, comfort, or reward. The original statement remains on the page, yet the operative meaning has already been changed. That is the self-serving bias at work in the biblical record.

Section 5. The Bias as Quiet Idolatry

The self-serving bias is idolatry conducted through revision rather than replacement.

Most people do not begin by inventing a completely foreign god and giving it a new name. They take the existing, culturally established template of the God of the Bible and quietly edit the content. The language stays familiar. The forms of worship remain recognizable. The claim to follow Christ continues. Yet the substance is changed until the resulting figure of God is more useful, less demanding, or more affirming of the preferred framework.

This is why the rebellion stays quiet. Open idolatry is easy to identify. The subtler form keeps the vocabulary of faithfulness while altering what that faithfulness actually requires. God is still called sovereign, yet His sovereignty is redefined so that it never collides with our desired outcome. He is still called just, yet the standard of justice is adjusted so that it protects the preferred group or ideology. He is still said to speak, yet His words are added to, softened, or expanded until they no longer constrain the self. The template remains. The authority structure is reversed.

The proper order is clear in Scripture. God establishes the rules through what

He says and demonstrates. Wisdom is then developed by learning, navigating, and utilizing those rules. The rules remain primary. Wisdom remains secondary and accountable to them. Deuteronomy 8:3 states, “He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.” Jesus Himself lived by that boundary.

The self-serving bias reverses the order. It begins with its own preferred wisdom, ideology, or moral framework, then approaches the biblical text as material to be adjusted until the text supports what the framework already demands. When a passage conflicts with our own preferred system, the passage is re-read, reclassified, or set aside so the system can continue unchallenged. The rules are no longer the source from which wisdom is derived. They become the raw material that must justify the pre-existing vision.

In this way any ideology functionally takes the place of God. Whether the framework is a prosperity formula, a national identity, or a contemporary moral consensus, once it is treated as non-negotiable and Scripture is required to submit to it, the framework has become the true authority. Jehovah is retained in name while being made subordinate to our preferred moral framework. The cultural or personal system judges the text rather than the text judging the system.

That is idolatry that worships ourselves and our beliefs over God. It does not discard the Word of God. It edits God’s Word until it serves the self. The god who remains is no longer the God of the Bible. He is the more convenient figure constructed to protect our preference, comfort, and ideology, that grants us the permission we seek. The language of faith continues, yet the object of worship has already shifted.

Section 6. The Moment of Recognition and Full Accountability

Once a person sees the self-serving bias for what it is, the situation becomes binary.

There is no longer a comfortable middle ground in which preferred beliefs can be retained while still claiming full loyalty to God’s Word. The choice stands in the open. Either the person accepts the loss of personally revered, long-held beliefs in favor of what God has actually said and demonstrated, or the person continues to worship the god constructed inside the mind. The second option may still use the language of faith and the forms of religion, yet the object of worship is no longer the God who speaks. It is the edited figure that preserves the self.

Continued preference for the revised version of God after the bias has been recognized is no longer ignorance. It is decision. The accountability becomes full because the person now knows the difference between the original Word of God and the adjusted version. To keep the adjusted version is to choose make-believe over belief.

This is a hard demand for the human psyche. Long-held beliefs are rarely just intellectual positions. They are woven into personal history, community belonging, emotional survival, and the sense of who a person is. They function like load-bearing walls. Removing them leaves an open space that feels unstable. The disorientation can be real. The sense of loss can be sharp. The mind resists because the preferred beliefs have helped carry the weight of life for years or even decades.

Yet the alternative is clear. To refuse the loss is to protect the constructed god at the expense of the true one. Jesus stated the cost of following Him in plain terms. In Matthew 16:24 He said, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.” Denying the self includes denying the versions of God the self has built to remain comfortable. The same demand appears in Luke 14:26 and 27, where Jesus requires a willingness to place Him above every other attachment.

The moment of recognition therefore brings both clarity and crisis. The bias is no longer hidden. The edited picture of God is exposed as edited. From that point forward the person either releases the preferred beliefs and submits to what God has said, or doubles down on the more useful version that protects identity and comfort. One path leads toward truth. The other continues the quiet idolatry under a familiar name. The choice cannot be postponed once the light has made the difference visible.

Section 7. The Corrective Posture – The Divine Binary

The only reliable safeguard against the self-serving bias is the posture Jesus Himself modeled.

In John 5:19 Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.” In John 7:16 He added, “My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me.” Jesus restricted both His actions and His teaching to what the Father said and did. He refused to go beyond that boundary. That restraint is the Divine Binary. Doctrine and direction are limited to what God has spoken and what God has demonstrated. Everything else remains secondary.

This posture directly confronts the self-serving bias. The bias expands,

softens, and completes the text in order to protect preference. The Divine Binary refuses the expansion. It leaves limited statements limited. It leaves gaps open rather than filling them with preferred material. It treats the original words as the measuring standard rather than allowing preference to become the standard.

Several practical disciplines flow from this boundary.

First, accept truth that is disliked. Preference is not evidence. If God has spoken clearly, the preference must yield. The alternative is to reshape God until He matches the preferred image, which is the oldest form of idolatry.

Second, learn to live with missing information. An incomplete statement creates tension. The mind wants to close the gap quickly with whatever material is nearest at hand. Once the gap is filled with inferior content, later correction requires painful excavation. Leaving the gap open preserves the possibility that accurate understanding can occupy the space later.

Third, never go beyond what God has said and never add to it. The moment an interpreter supplies motives, guarantees, mechanisms, or completions that God did not state, the boundary has already been crossed. The additions are rarely announced as additions. They are presented as implications or necessary clarifications. In practice they function as revisions.

Fourth, recognize that long-worn filters feel like reality precisely because they have been worn so long. A preferred reading that has been in place for years no longer feels like a preference. It feels like the only obvious meaning. Recognition rarely comes in a single moment. It comes through repeated, deliberate comparison of the preferred story against the actual words of God. The longer the filter has been in place, the more unnatural the corrected vision will feel at first.

These disciplines are not complicated, yet they are costly. They require a willingness to tolerate tension, to release comforting interpretations, and to let the text remain in authority even when it confronts the self. Jesus lived inside that boundary. The same boundary is the only reliable protection against quietly editing God until He becomes more useful than true.

Section 8. Closing Challenge

You go to the Bible for belief, not to make believe.

The self-serving bias has been exposed. It is the quiet habit of adjusting what God has said until the final version protects preference, comfort, identity, or

ideology. It retains the language of faithfulness while editing the substance. It reverses the proper order so that preferred wisdom and moral frameworks reshape the rules rather than submit to them. Once recognized, it leaves no neutral ground.

The choice is now clear. Either release the personally revered, long-held beliefs that cannot survive contact with what God has actually spoken, or continue to serve the more useful god constructed inside the mind. One path accepts the loss and submits to the text. The other path protects the self and continues the revision under a familiar name.

Jesus refused the second path. He limited Himself to what the Father said and did. He would not enlarge, soften, or complete the word in order to make it more comfortable. The same boundary stands in front of every person who opens the Scriptures.

The question is no longer hidden. When the bias is seen for what it is, the decision becomes unavoidable. Will the preferred beliefs be relinquished in favor of truth, or will the constructed version of God be kept because it is easier to live with?

That is the choice. It cannot be postponed once the light has made the difference visible.